(W)ho, w(h)en, w(h)ere, and w(h)at? The eighteenth-century pronunciation of 'wh'.

Compared to other areas of the language, there is relatively little research on the phonology of Late Modern English, arguably due to the idiosyncratic notation used by eighteenth-century authors, rendering it difficult to search for phonological information. We outline plans for a searchable database of eighteenth-century English phonology, and test whether such a resource might usefully answer questions about phonological variation and change.

Our test case involves the representation of 'wh' in nine eighteenth-century pronouncing dictionaries. In present-day RP, *whale*, *what*, *where* begin with /w/, whilst *who*, *whole* have initial /h/. Eighteenth-century sources present evidence, through their orthographic systems, of variation across authors between /hw/ and /w/ for the first set, hence a preserved versus unpreserved contrast in *where*/*wear*. Walker presents the loss of the contrast as a special case of 'h-dropping', which was just beginning to attract social stigma at this time in lower-class London English. Burn and Perry (Scottish) usually have /w/, although there are interesting isolated instances of /hw/. Spence (from Newcastle with Scottish heritage) uses distinct symbols for the initial consonants in *where* and *wear*, and even uses this symbol in *who*, *whole*. Therefore, in addition to the apparent social variation in the pronunciation of such words, geographical diversity can also be reconstructed, reflected in modern-day reflexes of the contrast in the British Isles, with /w, h/ the norm in England, but with /hw/ and even /f/ in Scotland.

By examining a pilot transcribed corpus of lexical items from nine pronouncing dictionaries, and also incorporating modern phonetic evidence into the realisation of 'wh', we are able to analyse the data in terms of segmental and suprasegmental phonology, morphology, homophony, onomatopoeia, and frequency, identifying clear influences of each to varying degrees according to geography and chronology.